

# Using YA Literature to Help Preservice Teachers Deal With Bullying and Suicide

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By reading young adult literature, preservice teachers can learn about bullying and suicide and develop empathy for future students.

Michael (all names are pseudonyms) appeared to be to a lively 10th-grade student, but underneath his happy exterior was a discernible sadness. Four months prior to his arrival in my classroom, his sister committed suicide by hanging herself with her dress for the upcoming prom. He wrote about this devastating experience in a memoir. As a second-year teacher, I was unsure how to help Michael, and I realized I was unprepared to deal with the tragedy in his life.

An incident of bullying, violence in the classroom, or suicide unsettles your view of teaching, your role as a teacher, and your relationships with students. Unfortunately, many educators will teach a young person who has been bullied or who has considered suicide. With approximately 3.2 million children in grades 6–10 bullied every year, this type of persecution is the most prevalent form of school violence (Blosnich & Bossarte, 2011; Cohn & Canter, 2002; Hong & Espelage, 2012). The link between school violence, bullying, and suicide is clear; victims of bullying are more

likely to have suicidal thoughts and actions (Kim & Leventhal, 2008). For Americans between the ages of 10 and 24, suicide is the third leading cause of death; however, more adolescents survive suicide attempts than die (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2012).

Many teachers do not feel adequately equipped to respond to bullying or suicide-related issues, although they must be prepared to deal with these problems. Often, teachers are unsure how they should intervene with a student considering suicide (Freedenthal & Breslin, 2010). However, antibullying and suicide awareness programs encourage adolescents to turn to teachers if they are bullied or contemplating suicide. This recommendation is due in part to the National Strategy for Suicide Prevention, which considers teachers “key gatekeepers” because they most frequently have contact with adolescents in distress (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2001, p. 78).

In the United States, the importance of teachers’ abilities to recognize bullying and the warning signs of suicide are being discussed at the legislative level. Many states have passed the Jason Flatt Act, which requires middle school and high school teachers to receive two hours of training in suicide awareness (The Jason Foundation, Inc., 2012). If teachers are



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“key gatekeepers,” then teacher education programs should consider how preservice teachers (PSTs) learn to assume this role. The critical and sensitive nature of bullying and suicide warrants discussions, so that PSTs become cognizant of the distress they may feel as conversations are overheard, while student journals are read, and when feelings are shared in confidence.

Helping PSTs recognize and discuss bullying and suicide is difficult work (Bauman & Del Rio, 2006; Rishel, 2006). Bauman and Del Rio (2006) found PSTs were able to recognize physical bullying, defined as physical violence and verbal bullying, or the practice of verbal threats. However, PSTs were less able to recognize relational bullying, defined as “social exclusion (‘You can’t play with us’), spreading rumors (‘Did you hear...?’), or withholding friendship (‘I won’t be your friend if you...’)” (p. 220). Even more problematic, PSTs thought relational bullying was less harmful than more overt forms of bullying.

As a teacher educator, it is difficult to re-create through classroom discussions the emotional turmoil of helping a student deal with bullying or suicide. Reading literature, however, is one effective way for PSTs to live through the experience of someone being bullied or considering suicide. A story of an adolescent’s life can provide an opportunity for PSTs to consider their future roles as teachers and their responses to students who are faced with bullying or contemplating suicide.

## Theoretical Framework

Rosenblatt’s (1938/1995) transactional theory of literature posits that reading is an active process in which the reader participates in creating meaning for a text by drawing on personal experiences. This literary experience isn’t solely a *reaction* to the text or an *interaction* with the text but a *transaction*, a continual “to and fro” process (p. 26). Transaction is reliant on the reader’s stance: efferent reading or aesthetic reading. Efferent reading “is focused primarily on what will remain as the residue after the reading—the information to be acquired, the logical solution to a problem, the actions to be carried out” (Rosenblatt, 1978/1994, p. 23). Aesthetic reading “is centered directly on what he or she is living through during his relationship with that particular text” (Rosenblatt, 1978/1994, p. 25). Rosenblatt (1938/1995) noted that these stances are not exclusive, but that readers are continually making choices about how they think about the text.

Guided by this theory, one’s experiences influence one’s reading, understanding, and thinking about texts. Reading also influences one’s understandings about current situations, new scenarios, and future dilemmas. Rosenblatt (1938/1995) explained that, through the reading of literature, “we can live different lives; we can anticipate future periods in our own life; we can participate in different social settings; we can try out solutions to personal problems” (p. 190).

Young adult literature explores issues relevant to adolescents’ lives; therefore, reading this type of literature can facilitate thoughtful conversations with PSTs about the future adolescents they will be teaching (Lewis & Petrone, 2010; Mason, 2010). Furthermore, Lewis and Petrone (2010) and Mason (2010) have found that young adult literature helps PSTs consider the issues present in adolescents’ lives and the obstacles adolescents might face in schools.

Because bullying and thoughts of suicide are problems adolescents might experience, young adult literature may provide PSTs with insights into these issues. Engagement with text might offer PSTs a way to analyze the reasons someone might bully or how it might feel to be bullied, as well as to consider why a person might contemplate suicide. Reading specific incidents of bullying and suicide in young adult literature may allow PSTs to imagine being teachers who must deal with similar incidents in their schools.

This article explores the experiences of PSTs after they had read *Thirteen Reasons Why* (Asher, 2011) and *Hate List* (Brown, 2009). Specifically, two research questions guided this work: (1) In what ways did PSTs transact with the texts as readers; and (2) how did this transaction influence their thoughts about being future teachers?

When I was Michael’s teacher, I was unprepared to help him cope with the tragedy in his life. Now, as a teacher educator, I am concerned with how I prepare PSTs to teach and interact with students who may be suffering from bullying, thinking suicidal thoughts, attempting suicide, or dealing with the aftermath of having friends who have done so.

## Impetus for My Research Questions

All secondary English language arts PSTs take the course Teaching Reading with Literature, which is designed to broaden their knowledge of young adult literature and the ways to teach such literature in the classroom. In this course, PSTs read 10 young adult books throughout the semester. They read several

books individually and then engage in online literature circle discussions for one selection. I introduce the class to outstanding books through weekly book talks.

In addition, PSTs participated in a book pass (Allen, 2004). During this activity, PSTs previewed and sampled a variety of books; they then had three minutes to explore one book, take notes, and determine if they might be interested in reading it. Figure 1 provides a sample list of books circulated during the book pass. With more than 75 titles introduced and examined, I was surprised that 88% of PSTs selected either *Thirteen Reasons Why* ( $n = 14$ ) or *Hate List* ( $n = 8$ ). Both books deal with the topics of bullying and suicide. I decided to understand more fully their reasons for this selection and then to examine their experiences as readers and future teachers in relation to incidents of bullying and suicide.

## Thirteen Reasons Why

Aimed at young adults ages 12 and older, *Thirteen Reasons Why* is the story of Clay Jensen and Hannah Baker (both age 16). Constructed in dual narratives, the story begins when Clay finds a mysterious box with his name on it. Inside the box are several cassette

FIGURE 1 Sample List of Young Adult Literature

Reference	Brief Summary
Anderson, L.H. (2009). <i>Wintergirls</i> . Viking Juvenile.	Lia and Cassie were best friends and "wintergirls," struggling with anorexia and vying to be the skinniest. When Cassie dies, Lia must confront her battles to save her own life.
Anderson, M.T. (2004). <i>Feed</i> . Candlewick.	Set in a future where all humans are fitted with a "feed" that connects brains to televisions and the Internet. Titus, a nonquestioning teen, meets Violet and begins to see problems with this world.
Dessen, S. (2009). <i>Along for the ride</i> . Viking Juvenile.	Before heading to college, Auden decides to spend the summer with her father's new family. She meets and falls in love with Eli, who helps her cope with her parents' divorce and find her identity just as she helps him come to terms with the death of someone close.
Gardner, S. (2008). <i>The red necklace</i> . Dial.	Set during the French Revolution. Yann, a 14-year-old orphan and mind reader, must save Sido, a sweet girl being manipulated by her evil father.
Green, J. (2008). <i>An abundance of Katherines</i> . Speak.	Colin is a child prodigy who has so far dated 19 girls all named Katherine. When the 19th Katherine dumps him, Colin and his friend take a road trip.
Kelly, J. (2009). <i>The evolution of Calpurnia Tate</i> . Henry Holt and Co.(BYR).	In 1899, Calpurnia Tate is interested in science and nature rather than being a young lady. Her relationship with her grandfather introduces her to a world of science.
Levine, K. (2009). <i>The best bad luck I ever had</i> . Puffin.	Set in the early 20th century. Dit and Emma struggle with the realities of segregation and racism in their small town.
Madigan, L.K. (2009). <i>Flash burnout</i> . Houghton Mifflin.	Blake is a 15-year-old photographer torn between his feelings for his girlfriend and his friend Marissa.
Satrapa, M. (2003). <i>Persepolis: The story of a childhood</i> . Pantheon.	This memoir recounts the author's memories of growing up in Iran during the Islamic Revolution.
Shusterman, N. (2007). <i>Unwind</i> . Simon & Schuster Books for Young Readers.	A second civil war between prolife and prochoice groups has resulted in a compromise called the "unwinding." Children under the age of 13 cannot be harmed, yet parents can decide to "unwind" children ages 13–18. This process requires the child's organs to be removed and donated. Three teens to be unwound runaway and challenge the law.
Swanson, J.L. (2010). <i>Chasing Lincoln's killer</i> . Scholastic.	This historical thriller follows the manhunt for John Wilkes Booth after the assassination of Abraham Lincoln.

tapes recorded by Hannah, his crush and the girl who had committed suicide two weeks earlier. The tapes detail the 13 reasons why Hannah decided

to end her life and the people she believes were instrumental in her decision. As Clay figures out the role he played in Hannah's suicide, he also learns how malicious gossip, betrayals by friends, and seemingly innocent actions can have powerful and destructive consequences.

### Hate List

*Hate List*, for ages 15 and older, begins with Valerie waking up to a horrifying realization: Her boyfriend, Nick, was the shooter in a tragic act of school violence. Valerie and Nick had created a "hate list" to deal with the constant bullying and harassment they suffered from classmates who made their lives miserable. Nick used this list to select the classmates he would kill. Even though Valerie saved the life of one student and the police cleared her of any crime, her classmates, teachers, and even her own family have a hard time not casting blame on her. Burdened with guilt and the censure of others, Valerie is forced to return to school, where she must confront her classmates and her culpability. Is Valerie a hero for her act of bravery, or is she a villain who contributed to Nick's violent act?

## Participants and Context

Participants were 22 undergraduate PSTs: 21 females and 1 male, ranging in ages from 19 to 23, who attended a midsize public university in the Midwest. They were juniors in the Integrated Language Arts program, which prepares PSTs to teach English language arts in grades 7–12. For the literature circle assignment, PSTs formed groups based on their reading selections. Because of the large number who wanted to read *Thirteen Reasons Why* and *Hate List*, smaller groups were formed; three groups read *Thirteen Reasons Why* ( $N = 4$ ,  $N = 5$ , and  $N = 5$ ), and two groups read *Hate List* ( $N = 3$  and  $N = 5$ ).

I wanted participants to have many and varied opportunities, particularly

multimodal avenues, to respond to literature. To provide these opportunities, I created the literature circle assignment to help PSTs explore how traditional face-to-face literature circle discussions could be facilitated online. Prior to participating in literature circles, PSTs read *Online Literature Circles Rock!* (Day & Kroon, 2010).

Literature circles took place through the university's Blackboard website. First, PSTs created a post, using a self-selected traditional literature circle role; Figure 2 lists the roles and descriptions. PSTs responded to each group member's initial post. Then, PSTs were expected to make an additional post. Finally, PSTs again responded to each group member's post and commented on others' responses to their own posts. Posts were not synchronous, but PSTs were given the days and times their discussions were required to be posted.

I wanted to honor literature circles as peer-led discussions and not dominate the PSTs' conversations. However, with the sensitivity of the topics under discussion, I knew I needed to monitor conversations to ensure that PSTs were comfortable with and untroubled by this sensitive topic. I provided all participants with contact information for the university's free and confidential counseling center; if they had questions or concerns, a staff member could provide immediate assistance. During the online conversations, I posed questions in my own posts,

**FIGURE 2** Traditional Literature Circle Roles

**Connector:** This student is responsible for finding connections between the text and the outside world. For example, the student can connect to his or her own life, happenings at school or in the community, similar events at other times and places, other books or stories, other writings on the same topic, or other writings by the same author.

**Questioner:** This student's job is to write down three questions about the reading selection. Students should explain why they have this question and why they think this question is important.

**Passage Master:** This student's job is to locate key sentences that the group should review. The idea is to help others notice important parts of the text. The student should explain why the passage was selected.

**Vocabulary Enricher:** This student is responsible for finding especially important vocabulary in the story. Vocabulary selected should focus on words that are unfamiliar, interesting, important, repetitive, puzzling, or descriptive or those used in an unusual way.

**Researcher:** This student's job is to share background information on topics related to the story. This information should help the group better understand the text.

*Note.* From Daniels, H. (2001). *Literature circles: Voice and choice in book clubs and reading groups*. New York, ME: Stenhouse.

such as, “Why do you think this?” or “How do you know this?”

## Data Collection and Analysis

In an effort to gain a detailed understanding of PSTs’ experiences while reading *Thirteen Reasons Why* and *Hate List*, and to better understand their experiences with the online literature circles, the following data were collected: (a) online literature circle discussions and (b) focus group interviews. All PSTs participated in focus group interviews, which varied in length from 30 to 40 minutes. PSTs attended one of four focus group interviews, based on their availability. Approximately four or five PSTs participated in each focus group. All interviews were audiotaped for transcription purposes and began with a brief review of the purpose of the research and a statement of confidentiality. The focus group interviews consisted of two primary questions: (1) Why did you select either *Thirteen Reasons Why* or *Hate List*? and (2) Is there anything you think you will take away from these books as you begin to work with adolescents? Probing questions were asked to gain information and clarify responses.

The data were analyzed using constant comparative analysis (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). I read and reread the online literature discussions and focus group interviews to find emerging themes, both of individual participants and across participants’ responses. Initial codes included “personal connections,” “taking a stance on bullying,” “recognizing signs of bullying and suicide,” “preventing bullying,” and “recognizing a student considering suicide.” These five initial codes led to more focused coding, which was grouped into three defined categories: “PSTs prior life experiences,” “the efferent and aesthetic continuum,” and “transactions as future teachers.”

## Findings

Three major findings clarify PSTs’ decisions to read these books. Furthermore, the findings draw attention to how participants interacted with the text personally and as future teachers.

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## Prior Life Experiences

PSTs’ initial reasons for reading *Thirteen Reasons Why* or *Hate List* were based on prior life experiences; they were searching for answers. Of the 22 PSTs, 10 knew either a friend or a classmate who committed suicide; one student related that a friend’s father committed suicide. PSTs hoped that through reading they would begin to understand why the persons they knew chose to commit suicide. Corinne said, “I wanted to have a better understanding of his thoughts.” Similarly, Shayla, whose high school classmate committed suicide, stated, “I often wondered why and what caused him to kill himself.”

PSTs also chose the texts because they had unresolved feelings about experiences with suicide. Steve, for example, explained that he was still coping with his grief, and he was hoping reading would help him find closure. He related, “My friend in high school killed himself, and I thought it might bring back some feelings I never really dealt with.”

For some PSTs, these very personal experiences with suicide influenced their reading of the books. They began to reimagine their friends as the characters. For example, Sherri decided to read *Thirteen Reasons Why* after discovering that Hannah, the main character, left cassette tapes revealing her reasons for committing suicide. Sherri’s close friend Don committed suicide a week after their high school graduation.

While reading the book, Sherri explained she was engaged in Hannah’s story because she was trying to envision her friend in Hannah’s position. She said, “The whole time I was reading; I was thinking, ‘what would it have been like if Don would have done this’ [left cassette tapes]. I felt myself trying to figure out what Don would have said about why he committed suicide.” These PSTs selected *Thirteen Reasons Why* and *Hate List* in the hope they would learn something that would provide understanding, comfort, and a sense of peace.

## The Efferent and Aesthetic Continuum

Although PSTs primarily adopted an aesthetic stance while reading the books, they were engaged fully in the efferent stance as they investigated to find statistics and factual answers. PSTs sought information from online articles, websites, and videos from the National Center for Victims of Crime, American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry, and Kidshealth.org. PSTs found this additional information if they selected the role as “researcher” for the literature circle group.



The PSTs' responsibilities were to locate and share background information on topics related to the novel. If they had questions about suicide, they used outside resources to help understand the characters' decision making. For example, Michelle wrote, "I had questions about the book and looked up information on [www.familyfirstaid.org/suicide](http://www.familyfirstaid.org/suicide)." In these instances, because PSTs posted this information to the discussion boards, new knowledge about young adults and suicide was shared.

During this reading, PSTs sought factual knowledge about suicide and bullying and used this information to better understand the characters' situations. For example, Elizabeth consulted the website of the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychology to understand Nick as a victim of bullying. She found, "Children who are bullied experience real suffering that can interfere with their social and emotional development." Elizabeth wrote, "I, by no means, intend to endorse what Nick did, or even what Valerie did. I presented that information to try and make their situation a little more understandable."

Reading factual information also assisted PSTs in noticing the characters' subtle warning signs of suicidal thoughts or actions. For example, after Avery noted that people who are considering suicide often give away belongings, Isabella pointed out that Hannah, in *Thirteen Reasons Why*, gives away her bicycle. Isabella wrote, "I never thought about giving away possessions as a warning sign, but when Hannah gave her bike away the warning signs became clear to me." This information helped PSTs develop an awareness of the signs of suicide and a deeper understanding about suicide.

### Living Vicariously

PSTs shifted from reflecting on their personal experiences to imagining their future lives as teachers. Rosenblatt (1938/1995) argues, "Literature permits something resembling ideal experimentation because it offers such a wide range of vicarious experiences" (p. 190). PSTs developed empathy for the characters; this was disclosed in the conversations, which explored the need to be empathetic toward future students after the PSTs became teachers.

During their reading and discussions, PSTs began to consider characters' experiences, rationales for decision making, and the context of their actions. PSTs contemplated reasons a young adult might

commit violent acts toward oneself and/or others. They noted that the bullying experienced by Nick and Valerie led to the creation of the hate list and to Nick's eventual shooting of classmates. PSTs also confronted the complex moral dilemma that Nick was bullied but was also a murderer. They tried to understand why Nick decided to shoot his classmates, and many became empathetic to his situation. Mindy wrote, "Many times throughout the novel, I've felt such empathy and understanding for Nick. He hurt and his experience in life had not given him tools necessary to deal with hurt in any way other than by hurting others." Similarly, Jamie said, "Nick should not have done what he did; it was horrible. The question is, 'What made him like that?' It was the constant jeers and insults from everyone."

These online discussions led PSTs to develop a more nuanced understanding of bullying and suicide. In their conversations, PSTs identified the three types of bullying: physical, verbal, and relational (Bauman & Del Rio, 2006). They identified physical bullying, such as when Nick is hit with pop bottles at the movie theater; and they identified verbal bullying, such as when a character calls Valerie "Sister Death" (Brown, 2009, p. 29).

They also noticed relational bullying in *Thirteen Reasons Why*. For example, Michelle wrote, "It is bullying when Courtney Crimson used Hannah for a ride to the party and then spreads rumors about her." Recognizing the various forms of bullying allowed PSTs to consider how they might help adolescents cope with bullying and the emotional consequences. They lived vicariously as teachers through their reading. They recognized how the adults in the stories did not support the adolescent characters; this realization provided an almost "trial-error experimentation" (Rosenblatt, 1938/1995, p. 190) when PSTs considered how they might react in similar situations.

PSTs who read *Hate List* realized the adults did not help Nick and Valerie deal with bullying. Courtney wrote, "In *Hate List* someone, like a teacher, should have helped Nick and Valerie. As teachers we need to be strongly against bullying and make sure there is respect in our classrooms." Jamie explained, "We need to create an environment where kids are safe and feel comfortable talking to us. The key is to address bullying every time. This didn't happen in *Hate List*." Similarly, Elizabeth wrote,

Often parents and teachers dismiss the seriousness of bullying by saying “kids will be kids,” or “what doesn’t kill you only makes you stronger.” It seems ridiculous that students should have to go to school worrying whether or not they will be terrorized. As teachers we have to be willing to take a strong stance against bullying.

A similar realization was made by PSTs who read *Thirteen Reasons Why*. Through their reading and conversations with one another on the online discussion boards, they detected Hannah’s contemplations about suicide. PSTs also realized that other characters, particularly Mr. Porter, an English teacher and guidance counselor, did not seem to recognize Hannah’s troubles. Kristen explained, “I don’t want to be Mr. Porter and find out I didn’t follow through when a student needed me.”

Similarly, Shayla said, “This book reminded me to recognize, to pay attention to even the smallest interaction that might seem like a student needs help.” Reading *Thirteen Reasons Why* and *Hate List* gave PSTs insight into the lives of young adults while providing opportunities for them to understand that, as teachers, they might be able to help adolescents who are considering suicide.

Reading also provided PSTs with opportunities to imagine how they would handle similar situations. Steve explained,

Students need to know they can talk to us and we need to be able to talk to students about these issues. When Hannah goes to talk to her guidance counselor; that scene just really upset me. I was urging him to do something and he didn’t. I couldn’t help but think that if I was in that situation, would I make the same mistakes Mr. Porter did? That scene was really overwhelming. But in a weird way it gave me confidence. It made me aware that this could happen and made me sort of prepare myself for this situation.

As PSTs envisioned themselves as teachers, they began to recognize that they are individuals who have daily and ongoing contacts with young adults.

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when a student needed me.*

They began to see that these many opportunities to interact with young adults could make them agents of change, and they could prevent bullying in their future classrooms or they could recognize a student who may be contemplating suicide. PSTs began to appreciate that they could have an effect on students and on the culture of the school.

## Discussion and Implications

Young adult literature portrays adolescents’ lived experiences and often addresses sensitive issues, such as bullying, suicide, illness, sexuality, pregnancy, drug use, and body image. By reading young adult literature, PSTs had the opportunity to reflect, gain insight, and develop introspective and empathetic points of view concerning their future students. Literature provides readers “the opportunity to feel more profoundly and more generously, to perceive more fully the implications of experience” (Rosenblatt, 1938/1995, p. 37). Young adult literature created a world for PSTs to picture themselves in the role as the person in whom a troubled adolescent confides. Reading young adult literature is one way to help PSTs develop the awareness, understanding, and empathy regarding the seriousness of the problems that many adolescents encounter.

Rosenblatt (1938/1995) noted that “the same text will have a very different meaning and value to us at different times or under different circumstances” (p. 35). PSTs in this study were in a unique position because they interpreted the literature as college students, considered young adults. They reflected on their own experiences with friends who committed suicide. They shifted perspectives, however, because they were preparing to teach in middle and high schools, places where they would be viewed as teachers, adults with specialized knowledge and authority. This critical position allowed them to consider texts through multiple lenses.

During their readings of *Thirteen Reasons Why* and *Hate List*, participants reflected on past experiences, struggled to make sense of experiences different from their own, and wrestled with complex moral dilemmas. PSTs also began to imagine themselves in their future roles as teachers. They discussed the need to be empathetic toward students and the importance of recognizing and stopping incidents of bullying. They also imagined how they might act in particular scenarios. Reading *Thirteen Reasons Why* and *Hate List* had simultaneously

different meanings and values, because they were transacting with the text as the young adults they were *and* the future teachers they wanted to become.

Rosenblatt's theory of transactional literature (1938/1995) provides insight into the intensity of the reading experiences expressed by PSTs when reading *Thirteen Reasons Why* and *Hate List*. In addition, the transaction with the text challenged PSTs to examine their feelings toward and knowledge of bullying and suicide. This is critical work because they will soon enter the classroom, as either student teachers or first-year teachers, considered "key gatekeepers." They will be expected to recognize bullying and the warning signs of suicide. PSTs may eventually have more intense training, as mandated by the Jason Flatt Act; however, this initial awareness while in their teacher education programs may help them feel more confident in their abilities to address instances of bullying or suicide contemplation. Based on this experience, PSTs may also consider using young adult literature as a reading option for their future students to engage adolescents in conversations about bullying and suicide.

Teachers of middle and high school students should be aware that young adult literature containing incidents of bullying and suicide can facilitate discussions with adolescents concerning past and current experiences and feelings of isolation, depression, and confusion (Fisher, 2005; Metzger & Adams, 2007; Quinn, Barone, Kearns, Stackhouse, & Zimmerman, 2003). Researchers found that reading young adult literature focused on bullying and suicide also provides adolescents with opportunities to gain insight into human nature, explore emotions that might seem puzzling or troubling, and reflect on the consequences, without engaging in these acts (Fisher, 2005; Quinn et al., 2003).

Young adult literature focused on issues considered sensitive, taboo, or provocative, such as bullying and suicide, may offer powerful reading experiences; however, it is necessary to offer a time and a safe place for readers to talk about these issues. Readers will need opportunities to express their experiences with the texts and how these experiences influence their current understandings of the text. These conversations can happen through literature circles or voluntary book clubs.

Literature circles can take place during face-to-face meetings or through online conversations. Although the notion of discussing provocative issues in young adult literature in online forums might seem

problematic, research supports the use of such forums for sensitive issues, such as suicide. For example, the Internet and discussion forums have been used in suicide prevention, intervention, education, and for support (Greidanus & Everall, 2010; Manning & VanDeusen, 2011). Greidanus and Everall (2010) found that adolescents considering suicide used an asynchronous message board to share personal stories and provide supportive interactions with others. It has also been noted that online forums for topics such as suicide allow for a more "nonjudgmental culture" and result in an increased sense of empathy and sharing (King & Moreggi, 1998; Walther & Boyd, 2002; Wright & Bell, 2003).

One worry concerning online forums is suicide ideation, meaning that a person might read an online post and then decide to attempt suicide. However, researchers note that it is uncertain whether suicide ideation is due to a new awareness or a person's previous experiences (Manning & VanDeusen, 2011).

To delve deeper into the literature and the topics presented, teachers can create linked text sets, or collections of resources from different genres and reading levels centered on a particular theme or topic (Wold, Elish-Piper, & Schultz, 2010). The pairing of works of fiction, nonfiction, informational texts, graphic novels, poetry, music, websites, and videos can be used in a linked text set. Multiple texts can help students connect factual information, such as statistics, to the situations presented in books. Linked text sets also allow students to consider multiple perspectives, to make connections, and to analyze information. These experiences can give students a more in-depth opportunity to explore and discuss the characters, situations, and their reactions to the texts.

Reading can offer students opportunities to have "imaginative rehearsals" to consider future scenarios or events (Burke, as cited by Gallagher, 2009, p. 66). Doing so can help readers visualize certain scenarios without having to live the event. Readers can consider how they might react to or handle situations and to consider the various outcomes of their actions. This process is important, especially if the outcomes could be potentially harmful, dangerous, or traumatic.

The limitations of this study must be addressed. All the participants shared a common interest in working with adolescents, and they were generally of similar age, gender, and social background. These demographics may have contributed to the findings.



Also, this study explored PSTs' experiences in one specific course and did not continue as they moved into student teaching and their first year of classroom teaching. Future research could explore whether these experiences translate into real classroom practices or interactions with students. The current findings, however, may assist teacher educators as they consider ways to engage PSTs in critical thinking about future students and the experiences adolescents face.

## Conclusion

Rosenblatt (1938/1995) wrote, "The capacity to sympathize or to identify with the experience of others is a most precious human attribute" (p. 37). Educators argue that schools should be a place of learning and a place of caring. Noddings (1984) stated that "in every human encounter, there arises the possibility of a caring occasion" (p. 222).

## Take Action

### STEPS FOR IMMEDIATE IMPLEMENTATION

- ✓ Select young adult literature containing instances in which characters are being bullied or are bullying others.
- ✓ Allow students to choose the book they would like to read.
- ✓ Arrange for students to participate in either face-to-face or online discussions.
- ✓ Talk to students about three types of bullying: physical, verbal, and relational (Bauman & Del Rio, 2006). Provide specific examples of each type.
- ✓ Have students complete the during-reading chart by locating specific passages in which characters face bullying. Ask students to identify the type of bullying the characters are experiencing. (The during-reading chart and a sample completed chart are available as supplemental information in the online version of this article.)
- ✓ Ask students to share this information with the other members of their reading group.
- ✓ Facilitate conversations about bullying and the consequences of bullying.

In this study, PSTs realized their role was to teach students and also to care for students, through developing relationships, taking a stance on bullying, and considering students' emotional well-being. Their conversations about *Thirteen Reasons Why* and *Hate List* were filled with empathy and caring. This concern, as Noddings (1995) noted, "implies a continuous search for competence. When we care, we want to do the very best for the objects of our care" (p. 676). PSTs were beginning their journeys to "search for competence" as teachers. They were starting to analyze all the factors essential to becoming the very best teachers for their students.

As teacher educators, we need to consider the ways PSTs think about caring for students and how we prepare them to face complex and sensitive issues, such as bullying and suicide. Young adult literature may provide the impetus for teacher educators and PSTs to engage in these powerful and necessary conversations.

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## More to Explore

### CONNECTED CONTENT-BASED RESOURCES

#### ONLINE RESOURCES

- American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry (2011). “Facts for families: Bullying”: [www.aacap.org/cs/root/facts\\_for\\_families/bullying](http://www.aacap.org/cs/root/facts_for_families/bullying)
- Benson Quinn, K. (2011). “A high-interest novel helps struggling readers confront bullying in schools”: [www.readwritethink.org/classroom-resources/lesson-plans/high-interest-novel-helps-390.html](http://www.readwritethink.org/classroom-resources/lesson-plans/high-interest-novel-helps-390.html)
- Buehler, J. (2011, May, 27). “Books about bullying” Text Messages: Recommendations for Adolescent Readers 6–12 [Podcast]: [www.readwritethink.org/parent-afterschool-resources/podcast-series/text-messages-recommendations-adolescent-30214.html?page=2](http://www.readwritethink.org/parent-afterschool-resources/podcast-series/text-messages-recommendations-adolescent-30214.html?page=2)
- Department of Health and Human Services. (n.d). “Stop bullying”: [www.stopbullying.gov](http://www.stopbullying.gov)
- SAVE: [www.save.org](http://www.save.org)